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A Half Century
in
Washington



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SIMON WOLF

April, 1922

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At the invitation of the Commercial, now City, Club of this city, the Honorable Simon Wolf on his seventy-eighth birthday, October 28, 1914, addressed the members of the Club, the subject being "A Half Century in Washington." He said in part:

MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS:

My first visit to Washington was in 1860; being a member of the Democratic Convention which convened that year in the City of Baltimore. I wished to pay my respects to President Buchanan and to Stephen A. Douglas. A curious coincidence, which as far as I can remember has never been spoken of, is that the Democratic party that year split asunder, which made the election of Abraham Lincoln, nominated in Chicago, a possibility. In 1912 the Republican party split asunder in Chicago, which led to the election of Woodrow Wilson, who was nominated in Baltimore. Thus history repeats itself.

My next visit to Washington was in June, 1862, since which time, with the exception of one year when I was United States Minister to Egypt, I have constantly resided here.

General McClellan was fighting the battles known as those of the Peninsular, ending by his being superseded by General Pope who fought the second battle of Bull Run. General Pope telegraphed to Washington that he wanted civilians to come down to aid him in taking care of prisoners, and to bring supplies, stores and bandages. Among others I volunteered to go, hiring a horse and buggy, loading it down with supplies, but when I came on the battle field, instead of taking care of prisoners, I was made a prisoner. My horse and buggy and stores were promptly confiscated, and I was ordered to be sent to Richmond. Fortunately the Commanding Officer recognized the hailing sign of distress of a freemason, and I was promptly returned to the city.

I do not care to enter into the ebb and flow of the contending armies, which for years struggled on this or the other side of the Potomac, and in the great West. Enough to say that the War ended, and the great review of May, 1865, took place. It was a great illuminating spectacle. Two hundred thousand men, the Army of the Potomac and the Army of the West, under their respective heroic leaders marched up Pennsylvania Avenue to be reviewed by President Johnson—Abraham Lincoln unfortunately having been assassinated the month before. To witness these citizens of

the United States, laying down their arms and returning to their respective homes, was a sight that can never be forgotten, and which typified and exemplified in the highest degree, the spirit of our American institutions. The War ended in a closer bond of union between the North and South than ever existed prior thereto. The names of Grant, Sherman and Sheridan, of Lee, Jackson and Longstreet, are intertwined with each other and will go down in the annals of history as heroic figures of a great struggle, each doing his duty according to his own conscience, and all representing that splendid American spirit which has so far been the guiding motive and impulse of the American people.

The Spanish War of '98 accentuated this sentiment still more closely, and the sons of the Southland, New England, of the great Northwest, stood shoulder to shoulder in defense of the flag, and to expel from our shores the last vestige of a European Monarchy. Let us hope and trust that this spirit of concord and good will and national progress may continue for all time. That sectionalism will die, and that the American spirit of unity will ever be preserved, and as President Wilson has said, that the provincialism of prejudice will be banished from our shores.

The Washington of 1865 with that of today can only be realized by remembering the epigrammatic remark of Charles Dickens when he said it was a city of magnificent distances. George Washington and the great French engineer L'Enfant had made splendid plans for the Capital of a great Republic, but they were principally undeveloped, and it was only when General Grant became President and Alexander R. Shepherd, Governor of the District, aided as he was by hundreds of the leading citizens, that the golden opportunity came for a new Washington, and the magnificent public buildings, the palatial private residences, the clean streets, the unobstructed parking, the beautiful parks, the splendid lighting, all bear evidences of the indomitable energy, perseverance, genius and self-sacrifice of those men who, notwithstanding the enmity and opprobrium of small men, went on fearlessly in the pursuit of what they knew was right and just, and we can truthfully say today, as Sir James Bryce said before the Geographical Society, that Washington is not only now, but is destined to be, the most beautiful and artistic Capital of the world. We are here a polyglot population—all sections of the country, and indeed of the world, are represented. We are not a manufacturing city, nor are we blessed with multi-

millionaires, but we have men and women of the highest culture, social standing, refinement; men and women who vie with each other to make this city "a thing of beauty and a joy forever." The time is sure to come when the McMillan plan will be realized: when the whole District of Columbia will be one beautiful speedway; when the memorial bridge of Arlington shall be erected; when in every part of our public parks there will be erected not only monuments and busts to the army and navy heroes, but to those of the midnight lamp, whose inventions and discoveries, whose contributions to arts and science, have made the world better and happier. Washington will become a great educational center, from which will radiate an influence for higher ideals. Let us then be thankful that while Europe is convulsed in a bloody struggle for commercial supremacy, we in this country are blessed with peace, living contentedly under our own vine and fig tree, at war with no one, inspired by the loftiest ideals of patriotism, to bring home to our children and our children's children, the blessings of peace and good will, and let us never prove recreant to the high and holy trust reposed in us. We are not only, as citizens of Washington, trustees for the nation, but we also must evidence by our work, that we have learned the lesson of being loyal and patriotic Americans and that our highest ambition is to transmit to future generations the inestimable boon of enjoying liberty without license, ever appreciative of that still greater blessing, the right of conscience and free worship, so that while every creed shall be undisturbed, no one creed shall dominate over the other.

One great factor that cannot be too much deplored in our communal life is the lack of unity. We have too many divergent local organizations, working for their individual aggrandizement, and ignoring the high standards of the city. We are not paupers, although governed by Congress. We are to all intents and purposes devoted to the best interests of the nation which are reflected in the prosperity of the Capital, and therefore harmony and concerted action is essential to the greater development and possibilities of the future. The time was in the past,—I remember being one of the men that made it possible—when leaders of both Houses of Congress, members of the Cabinet, and even the President, were invited to evening receptions or dinner, not for the purpose of bribing them, but for the purpose of acquainting them with our aims and objects and the needs of the Capital. It was a wise plan and

worked well. Let us endeavor to prove to the nation's legislators that what we seek is not to help ourselves, but to help each other, and not to legislate for the representative city of the nation on a sectarian or local basis, but in a broad national spirit that shall vindicate the highest ethics of the past and of the future. We old residents can only be reminiscient, we are in the winter of life, but you young men are in the springtime of golden opportunity, see to it that the City that bears the name of the Father of this blessed Republic, shall continue to be the most beautiful, the most orderly Capital in the world.

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